

# **New Light on Skirmish Here (*Tracy City, TN*)**

**By JIM NICHOLSON**

*(Since interest has grown lately in the Civil War between the United States of America, I felt it would be of help to researchers of said War if I transcribed the series of newspaper articles written by Jim Nicholson and published in the Grundy County Herald in 1977. Jim's articles were meant to shed new light on "The Skirmish of Tracy City, Tenn." I present the following transcription – Jackie Layne Partin)*

## **Maj. Bledsoe, Leader of Confederate Raid**

On Jan. 20, 1864, the Union garrison occupying Tracy City was attacked by a Confederate raiding party on horseback. In the "Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies," this Civil War action is denoted "The Skirmish of Tracy City, Tenn."

An article about this skirmish appeared in the recently published "Grundy County, 1844-1976." It was based, however, almost entirely on reports which were submitted by Union officers after the attack. The Official Records, unfortunately, contain no statements by officers of the Confederate party which would add to our perspective of this Civil War action in Tennessee.

Thus our earlier article bore a likeness to an old cowboy movie in that it was dominated by an action—Confederates riding into town, shooting the place up, putting the torch to buildings, demanding a surrender, and, not getting one, riding off into the fading sunlight of a winter afternoon.

But what did this sound and fury signify? Just as the typical cowboy movie only implied a period in the history of the Trans-Mississippi West and roughed in some Western place for its setting, so was it understood that the time of our skirmish was the Civil War and our place Tracy City, a mining town of Cumberland Mountain.

What we failed to do was see if it might not be possible to dig out the background of this Confederate raid in order to elevate it from a mere isolated military action to a significant incident of our greatest war. Belatedly, we have done this digging; and now we are ready to tell the story behind "The Skirmish of Tracy City, Tenn."—and, for good measure, to report another Civil War action in Grundy County which heretofore has not been given to the public.

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The two most important characters in our story are Confederate officers whose native homes were in what today is known as the Upper Cumberland area. They are Col. John M. Hughs (occasionally spelled Hughes in his own and in official records) of Livingston, or

nearby, in Overton County and Maj. Willis Scott Bledsoe of Jamestown, or its vicinity, in Fentress County, which in more recent times has been made famous by the late Sgt. Alvin C. York.

Near the beginning of the war, Hughs and Bledsoe were enlisted into the Confederate service by the same recruiter, their units trained at the same camp, and they took part in some of the same engagements.

Then, for a time their paths diverged. Two years later, however, fortuitous events brought them together again to wage a desperate—and often successful—campaign behind Union lines.

It was during this campaign that Maj. Scott Bledsoe led a raiding party into Tracy City shortly after noon one mid-winter day of 1864.

### **Hughs and Bledsoe Together**

John Hughs was about 29 years of age and Scott Bledsoe 24 when they first signed into the Confederate Army for 12-month enlistments early in August, 1861.

Hughs was a second lieutenant of Capt. Luther D. Myers' Company D of the 25<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry Regiment, a force of 1100 men recruited mainly in the counties of Overton, Putnam, White, and Jackson. Bledsoe brought to camp his own unit, numbering about 108 men, which in the beginning was known as Capt. W. S. Bledsoe's Company of Cavalry.

The 25<sup>th</sup> Infantry and Bledsoe's company both went into training at Camp Myers, which was located at "Old Monroe," a site found today not many miles out of Livingston on the road to Byrdstown (State Highway 42).

For much of the first year of their service with the Confederacy, Bledsoe and his company of horsemen, said to have been armed with Navy pistols, were kept occupied in their home neighborhood along the Tennessee-Kentucky line. In September, 1861, Gen. F. K. Zollicoffer, the Confederate commander in the area, reported that "Capt. Bledsoe's cavalry," operating about the state line, "routed the Lincoln men, and captured about 60 muskets" at Albany, Ky.

Bledsoe was between Jamestown and Camp Myers on Oct. 14 when he was ordered to Bowling Green, Ky.; and in consequence, the people of the vicinity were "greatly alarmed...of being left without protection." By the end of the month, however, he was ordered back to Jamestown.

A week later Bledsoe's cavalry was reported at Camp Myers again; and at that same time J. G. M. Ramsey of Knoxville, a famous East Tennessee Confederate, was saying of Bledsoe in a letter to President Jefferson Davis, "everyone admits of the bravery and vigilance of the officer...."

### **At Fishing Creek**

On Jan. 19, 1862, almost exactly two years before the raid on Tracy City, Bledsoe's men were called on to display their bravery and vigilance at the Battle of Fishing Creek near Somerset, Ky. In this important engagement they served as the advance guard of Zollicoffer's Brigade during the battle and as the rear guard when it became necessary to retreat.

In the retreat Col. Cummings, who had succeeded Gen. Zollicoffer as brigade commander when that officer was killed earlier in the day, ordered Bledsoe to leave his horses on the north side of the Cumberland River; and so were the animals lost.

Capt. Bledsoe's cavalry soon was remounted, however; and for the first time left home territory and joined the army under Gen. Albert Sidney Johnston at Decatur, Ala. Not many days had passed, though, when Johnston ordered the company back to its previous duty of guarding the Tennessee-Kentucky border. Thus did it miss the bloody Battle of Shiloh.

Back in Tennessee, Bledsoe's men became engaged March 25 in a severe skirmish near McMinnville and lost four men killed and three wounded. There is not another mention in the Official Records of the company's activities until June 7 when Federal Brig. Gen. J. T. Boyle reported to E. M. Stanton, the secretary of war, "Bledsoe and other rebel chiefs have control of Clinton County," which was in Kentucky just across the state line from Byrdstown.

### **Bledsoe's Cavalry in Murray's Regiment**

The last report which shows Capt. Bledsoe and his cavalry still operating in southern Kentucky is dated Aug. 18, 1862. By the next month Bledsoe had entered upon a new chapter of military service to the Confederacy. He and his company were ordered to join Col. John P. Murray's 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry Regiment.

Now it became their duty for Bledsoe and his men to ride away from their native countryside, a land marked by its beautiful ridges and valley, hills and river bottoms; to relinquish independent campaigning; and to become an integral part of the larger army in the West.

With Murray's regiment they rode into central Kentucky and took an active part Oct. 8 in the costly Battle of Perryville, losing two men of their own wounded and seven horses killed. Following the retreat from Kentucky, this cavalry joined the main body of the Army of Tennessee just south of Nashville.

The 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry, which included Bledsoe's company, had become a unit in what was known as Wharton's Brigade, commanded by Brig. Gen. John A. Wharton of Texas. For most of the rest of the war, Bledsoe would be in Wharton's command; and it was on Gen. Wharton's authority that Maj. Bledsoe ordered the Union post at Tracy City to surrender on the day of the raid here.

No sooner did Bledsoe give up his independent command and merge his company into a cavalry regiment than his capacity to lead horsemen in battle was recognized. With Baxter Smith he was one of two majors in the 4<sup>th</sup> Tennessee. Later, when Col. Murray resigned to take his seat in the Confederate Congress, Maj. Bledsoe was given command of a battalion with the understanding that it would be augmented to regimental size. Instead, however, he became second in command early in 1863 of the new 8<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry Regiment commanded by Smith, who was promoted to colonel.

In the meantime, Bledsoe had been commended for his work following the Battle of Murfreesboro on the last day of 1862. Gen. Wharton reported, "Major Bledsoe...was prompt and efficient in burning the wagons which could not be removed."

Coincidentally, the next mention of Bledsoe in the Official Records is in connection with destroying by fire something else which would have a value to the enemy if it fell into his hands. This report dated June 3 came to Gen. Wharton, now in north Georgia: "Major Bledsoe went off this morning with three companies, for the purpose of burning a steamboat which was grounded about 4 miles above Rome."

Scott Bledsoe, then a native of the plateau country around Jamestown, appears by all accounts to have been an effective leader of cavalry. He exercised courage, resourcefulness, vigilance, and leadership.

### **Col. Hugh's Campaign Behind Union Lines**

We have stated that the two most important characters in the story of the Confederate raid on Tracy City of Jan. 20, 1864 were Col. John M. Hughs of Livingston and Maj. Scott Bledsoe of Jamestown; and we have traced Bledsoe's military career.

Hughs, in the meantime, had an even more rapid rise through the ranks of commissioned officers. He enlisted Aug. 1, 1861, as a second lieutenant in Company D of the

25<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry Regiment. When the regiment reorganized at Corinth, Miss., May 10, 1862, after having taken part in the Battle of Shiloh, he was elected captain. By July 22, he was elevated to major; and then almost immediately, on July 25, he achieved the rank of colonel and was placed in full command of the 25<sup>th</sup>. Previously, this regiment of infantry had been commanded by Col. S. S. Stanton of Carthage and Lt. Col. R. C. Sanders of Hartsville.

After being transferred from Tupelo, Miss., to the vicinity of Chattanooga, the 25<sup>th</sup> remained there for about a month. It then was ordered north, first to Sparta, then on into Kentucky. By Oct. 8 it was on the same battlefield site at Perryville as was the cavalry of Maj. Scott Bledsoe.

For the next several months the men of Hughs and those of Bledsoe continued to be found on the same battlefields. They were at Murfreesboro together, where Col. Hughs sustained a wound: and they fell back together through Middle Tennessee, finding themselves by the end of the fateful summer of 1863 in the vicinity of Chattanooga. On Sept. 19-20 the 25<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry and Bledsoe's horsemen, now a part of the Baxter Smith's 8<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Cavalry, were among the thousands of Confederates fighting in the sanguine Battle of Chickamauga. How costly it was to the 25<sup>th</sup> may be judged from the fact that it suffered more than one-third casualties among its men engaged.

### **Special Duty for Col. Hughs**

Col. John Hughs, however, was not there to lead his men at Chickamauga. The reason is that about a month before, on Aug. 16, he received special orders from Gen. Braxton Bragg. These orders, according to the report which Hughs filed upon his return eight months later, reached him at Loudon and instructed him "to proceed with twenty men of my regiment...to Middle Tennessee...for the purpose of collecting absentees...and with authority...to enforce conscription."

In order to carry out an order which promised to take them over a wide range of territory, Hughs and his foot soldiers needed the mobility that only horses could give in those days. Accordingly, they were instructed to rendezvous with a company of cavalry then operating in Middle Tennessee under Capt. J. J. Amonett. Like Hughs himself, Amonett was from Overton County; and he had served in the early stages of the war along the Tennessee-Kentucky border with Scott Bledsoe. It can be assumed, therefore, that Hughs and Amonett were well known to one another.

Col. Hughs and his 20 men set out from Loudon on Aug. 18. Within a week they had linked up with Amonett, become mounted, and set out in the direction of what was home to all or most of the men—Overton County. Along the way they picked up about 20 "stragglers" and placed them under arrest.

### **Decides 'To Furnish Villains a Little Fighting'**

No sooner, however, did Hughs and his command reach their destination in northern Middle Tennessee than word came to them of Federal troops passing through Overton and White counties. When scouts were sent out to check these stories, they found, according to Col. Hughs' later report, that not only were such troops "passing through in considerable force both via Sparta and Livingston," but that in addition they "had completely cut off my communications with the Army...by Crossville, Kingston and by Jamestown...."

At this point Hughs made a crucial decision, one which turned a mission to pick up stragglers and to enforce conscription into a wide-ranging campaign behind Union lines. The commander "became satisfied that it was too dangerous an undertaking" to get back to the main body of the confederate Army; and he reasoned that "it now being out of my power to collect and send men to the Army, the least we could employ ourselves at was operating against the enemy, whose presence had greatly emboldened the Union Tories, and they were becoming very troublesome – going in bands, robbing and murdering citizens and soldiers. To furnish these villains a little fighting was necessary."

It well may be, of course, that in saying that it was "too dangerous" to return to the Army, Col. Hughs was rationalizing a decision which he had made on other grounds. Remember that he and his men were near their homes and their kinfolks; and here were Yankee soldiers occupying the country and Union sympathizers, so often composed of the local rabble, harassing those who were committed to the cause of the Confederacy.

Under the circumstances, a kind of rage may have possessed Hughs and committed him to his course of furnishing "these villains a little fighting."

Whatever the original impulse was, it caused John Hughs to occupy his command for the next seven and one-half months in one attack after another on the troops and supplies of the enemy. To carry out this campaign, Hughs gathered to him about 106 officers and men.

The colonel himself put up the money for this undertaking, which he eventually calculated to have cost him more than \$47,000. In reference to expenses, he states in his report: "The nature of the service engaged in required rapid marches, and the country being extremely rough and hilly, good horses lasted but a very short time, and it was only with the greatest care and at considerable expense that the men could keep themselves mounted. Owing to the scarcity of forage and provisions our expenses were very heavy, and as the people were unwilling to take receipts or scrip for anything furnished us, I was compelled to pay all expenses in money out of my own private funds...."

Due to the loss of a haversack which contained receipts for his out of pocket expenses, Col. Hughs had great difficulty getting reimbursed by the Confederate government. The haversack was lost, by the way, at the foot of Beersheba Mountain on the only occasion that Hughs' command was surprised by a party of Union soldiers, an engagement in Grundy County which will be detailed later.

### **A Widespread Campaign**

After having made his decision to launch an operation both against Federal troops and Tennessee Unionists, Col. Hughs did not take long in getting started. He reported that on Sept. 6 his command "attacked the rear of the 14<sup>th</sup> Illinois Cavalry (apparently en route to Morristown), inflicting considerable loss and completely routing them."

The next attack was launched two days later against what Hughs called "Baty's band of robbers." This was a notorious party of guerillas out of Fentress County under the command of "Tinker Dave" Beaty. Hughs said his men killed eight of Beaty's men and routed the rest.

On Sept. 16 there passed through the country in which Hughs' command was operating a "brigade of enemy on their way to Knoxville via Albany, Ky." The Confederates followed this contingent, watchfully; and when opportunity presented, cut off and capture a detachment of the 11<sup>th</sup> and 27<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Mounted Infantry. Twenty-six men were taken, but the great prize was 112 head of fine beef cattle. What a barbecue must have resulted! for, as Hughs reported, "there being no way to turn over the property to the Army, it was appropriated by the captors."

### **The Capture of Glasgow**

Even the cattle were as nothing, however, compared with what was captured when Hughs attacked next. With a command now of 120 men, he left the hill country of the Upper Cumberland, set out in a northwesterly direction, and marched more than fifty miles from his home territory.

His object was Glasgow, Ky., which was occupied by the 37<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Mounted Infantry under Maj. Samuel Martin and was filled with Union supplies of all kinds, quartermaster, commissary, and ordinance—which meant clothing, food, and weapons and ammunition.

About break of day on Tuesday, Oct. 6, Col. Hughs and his men rode into the courthouse square at Glasgow, rounded up the provost guard there, exchanged a few rounds

of fire, and then set out with haste to the camp of the 37<sup>th</sup> and the fort just outside of town. Having arrived there, according to the subsequent report of Maj. Martin, "They charged right into camp and up to the fort....The dash into camp was so sudden that the men were thrown into confusion; in fact, they were panic-stricken...."

Co. Hughs ordered the surrender of the command and the fort, which he received. What fell into his hands was tremendous—more than 200 men, 200 horses and horse equipment, and one hundred guns, mostly carbines. In addition, commissary stores and a large building at the fort were burned. Hughs set the value of the goods carried off or destroyed at not less than a quarter of a million dollars.

The prisoners—226 of them, Hughs said—were taken into Tennessee and paroled there. He also claimed having killed nine and wounded 26 of the enemy. His own losses he set at one killed and four wounded, although Maj. Martin said 13 Confederates were wounded, four mortally. Martin's report, however, aimed at putting the very best face possible on a disastrous setback. His superior, Brig. Gen. E. H. Hobson, referred to the event as "the disgraceful surrender of Glasgow."

Col. Hugh's success there was in some ways his greatest during an eight-month campaign. It left his men with fresh mounts in reserve, weapons, clothing, and other needed goods.

### **Scott Bledsoe's Command Arrives**

Almost immediately after the return of Hughs' command, flush with success, from Kentucky, the force was augmented by a surprising arrival. On Oct. 1-9 Gen. Joseph (Fightin' Joe) Wheeler's cavalry set out on a raid through Middle Tennessee for the purpose of disrupting Gen. Rosecrans' extended communications. During this raid Wharton's division, which included the cavalry of Maj. Scott Bledsoe, was dispatched to burn the depot at McMinnville.

On this assignment there was fighting both at McMinnville and at Hill's Gap near Beersheba Springs. Somewhere along the line, Bledsoe seems to have found himself in the same spot Hughs claimed to be in one month before—cut off from the main body of the Army and unable to get back to it. Naturally enough, then, he and his men turned their mounts homeward—northeasterly toward Overton and Fentress counties.

Once in that county, they soon made a connection with the command of Col. Hughs, with whom they would campaign at the enemy's rear for the period of the next six months.



It was after the linkup between the command of Hughs and Bledsoe was effected that the latter made his raid on Tracy City.

### **Bledsoe Halted at Altamont To Get "Tories"**

Following the successful raid on Glasgow of Oct. 6, the command of Col. John M. Hughs seems to have laid low for a time. In his official report he does not mention another action until Nov. 27, more than seven weeks later.

In the meantime, he had been joined by Maj. Scott Bledsoe. Explaining Bledsoe's appearance, Hughs stated the matter in few words; namely: "This officer had been cut off from Maj. Gen. Wheeler's command, and had reported to me for duty."

At this point in our story, before citing the actions engaged in by the Hughs-Bledsoe command leading up to and following the attack on Tracy City, it would be well for the reader to form a mental picture of the great extent of territory over which these Confederate cavalymen operated. Think of placing the point of a compass at the town of Cookeville and of fixing the radius to be swept at sixty miles. Then draw a circle. The area in Middle Tennessee and southern Kentucky which would be encompassed includes Scottsville, Ky., to the northwest; Glasgow to the north; Monticello, Ky., to the northeast; Washington, Tenn. (seven miles from Dayton) to the southeast; Tracy City to the south; and Tullahoma to the southwest. The places named are the most distant points in all directions which were attacked, but the men of Hughs and Bledsoe were in action at many other places within the circle. In sum their theatre of operations was an area of ten thousand square miles, a vast domain to range over without a fixed base of supplies and without reserve forces.

Col. Hughs took his contingent about 55 miles to launch the first in a series of late fall attacks. His effective force up to 149 men, he struck Monticello on Friday, Nov. 27, gaining the surrender of the garrison of 153 officers and men. Unfortunately, there was little else to show for the long ride because, according to Hughs, the place had "few stores of any kind." Added to this misfortune was a severe wound sustained accidentally by Maj. Bledsoe.

Scott Bledsoe's kinsman (probably his brother), Capt. R. F. Bledsoe, was in command of a portion of Hughs' force which became engaged Dec. 1 with part of Col. James P. Brownlow's cavalry, a Tennessee regiment fighting on the Union side. The fighting was severe; Bledsoe lost five killed, while Brownlow's loss was set at 13 killed, eight wounded and seven captured.

A week later (Tuesday, Dec. 8) Hughs had gathered a peak force of 200 men for an attack on Scottsville, Ky., an object which required another ride of about 55 miles. This time not only was the garrison of some 86 men captured, but also "a considerable quantity of

quartermaster and commissary stores, together with about 500 stands of small arms, and several hundred saddles, bridles, etc.” Such loot made up for the dry well at Monticello.

Col. Hughs reports just one more action before the onset of severe winter weather. He attacked the 13<sup>th</sup> Kentucky Mounted Infantry at Livingston on Dec. 15 and drove this force northward and out of Tennessee.

### **Winter and the Command Divides**

By all accounts the winter of 1864 was a severe one—like our own recent winter, cold enough to cause streams and rivers to freeze over. John Hughs and Scott Bledsoe concluded sometime near the end of the year that it had become too cold for them to employ all their forces together. Thus, according to Hughs, since “during the very cold weather of January 1864, it was impossible to operate on a large scale, and our time was occupied in hunting down the bushwhackers and Tories, ...for that purpose my command was divided; a portion under Maj. Bledsoe...operated in White County, and the part commanded by myself remained in Overton.”

Hughs and Bledsoe did not link up again for about six weeks—until “Feb. 14; and it was while their commands were operating independently that Bledsoe’s detachment made its attack on Tracy City.

Before recounting the details of that attack, it might be well for us to pause and review what we know both about the man who led it and the purposes which his force at this time were seeking to achieve. From the outset of the war, it may be recalled, Scott Bledsoe had been a commander of cavalry. He had been cited for his bravery and vigilance. We have noted two instances showing him careful to destroy by fire material that might prove useful to the enemy.

Also from the beginning of the war, Bledsoe was accustomed to having to capture from Union forces much of what he needed to fight with, to wear, and to eat. As early as September, 1861, he got muskets at Albany, Ky.; and as recently as the past month, his men had obtained new rifles at Scottsville. Such work as this was dictated as much by necessity as by the aim of diminishing the supplies of the enemy.

Early in the war Bledsoe had used his force to keep Union troops out of his part of Middle Tennessee. He aimed to protect the citizenry of the area. Then, as Union troops gained entry into Tennessee and began to pass through the country, Bledsoe, with Hughs, had sought to harass them. Moreover, the two Confederate commanders behind the lines saw it as their particular duty to hunt down Tennesseans of Union sentiments who had been

emboldened by the Union presence to help the Yankee cause, or to help themselves among a defenseless population, as the case might be.

When, on Wednesday, Jan. 20, 1864, Scott Bledsoe's force came first to Altamont and subsequently to Tracy City, the engrained military habits of the man and the purposes which he and Hughs were pursuing at that time combined to determine the conduct of the Confederate cavalymen. Bledsoe and his men did here what they had been doing elsewhere, although their success was not so great as it had been at some other places. With just a little better luck, however, the raid could have been a most successful one.

### **Destination: Grundy County**

After Col. Hughs divided his command, it may be recalled, Bledsoe was given the duty of "Hunting down bushwhackers and Tories" in White County. Assuming, then, that he started out from somewhere in the vicinity of Sparta, he had to put in a ride of about 50 miles before arriving about ten o'clock that January morning at Altamont. It is probable that his horsemen did most of their riding the previous day and camped Tuesday night somewhere in Collins River Valley, perhaps at the foot of Beersheba (Short) Mountain at the same site where they were surprised by the Yankees some two months later.

However the long trip into Grundy County may have been broken up, by then the Confederates were at Altamont. They went quickly about their business there. Informants had told them of at least two "Union Tories" in the place. One was Capt. Stephen P. Tipton, who commanded Company E of the 1<sup>st</sup> Alabama and Tennessee Vedette Cavalry, a Union regiment recruited in Tennessee and north Alabama.

Whether the report was a defamatory lie or in accordance with the actual occurrence, the later claim of Federal officers was that two of Bledsoe's men dressed in Union uniforms rode up to Tipton's house and called out, "Captain, the rebels are coming." Then, as Tipton emerged from the dwelling, he was shot down and killed. A private in his company, David Franklin, also was reported killed by the Confederates at Altamont.

For Bledsoe's troop of about one hundred men, there remained a ride of fifteen miles to Tracy City. It is interesting that they covered this ground in about three hours, which may give some idea as to the customary rate of speed in those days of unhurried cavalry.

### **Raid Here Another Surprise for Yankees**

It was a matter of survival for Col. John Hughs and Maj. Scott Bledsoe to campaign by stealth during their months behind enemy lines. Never once did Union scouts and pickets

manage to forewarn a threatened garrison that these Confederates were coming; and at Tracy City on Jan. 20, 1864, the command of Bledsoe pulled off another surprise attack. Men of the late Capt. Stephen D. Tipton were supposed to have been serving as pickets along the road between Altamont and Tracy City, but they either were not at their posts or were unable to send out a warning. The discipline of Tipton's force appears to have been lax at best.

Thus the report of Lt. Col. William B. Wooster, commander of the 20<sup>th</sup> Connecticut Volunteers, telling of the sudden appearance of Bledsoe's cavalry in Tracy City, reads very much like that of Maj. Samuel Martin, who described the unexpected dash of Hughs' men into the fort at Glasgow. Wooster reported: "The sentinel discharged his piece, but so rapid was the movement of the force that no alarm reached the camp until the whole force rode in."

Tracy City, on the day the Union garrison here was attacked, had been occupied by Federal troops for about 6 ½ months. It had fallen to the enemy soon after the army of Gen. William S. Rosecrans occupied Cowan and Decherd during the early days of the preceding July. By then the Confederates already had sent locomotives and railroad cars to the south; but Union officials decided to permit a private contractor to run the mines here, and to provide him transportation, reopened the Tracy City Branch line.

To garrison the place, Company B of the 20<sup>th</sup> Connecticut was detached. It numbered two commissioned officers—Capt. Andrew Upson and 2<sup>nd</sup> Lt. Theodore Jepson—and 72 men. Capt. Tipton's cavalry also was part of the Union force at Tracy City, but Col. Wooster said of its 73 men, "none...are armed—except some half-dozen wit squirrel rifles—none mounted, and none of the slightest service." Only three of them could be found during the assault.

The coal mine here and the company store operated in conjunction with it were the property of the Tennessee Coal and Railroad Co., but had been leased by the U. S. Government to F. O. Howard and Co. A Mr. Benham seems also to have had an interest in the business, as the trading establishment is referred to as "Howard and Benham's store." It probably was located on or very near the site occupied today by the county garage. The stockade for the garrison had been built, according to Col. Wooster, "with reference to a defense of the store and buildings in the immediate vicinity...."

The stockade, however, provided no security for such other structures in town as the depot, the engine-house and the frame buildings about the mines. The depot, by the way, was located farther up into the heading, perhaps by several hundred yards, than the depot of more recent times that burned in 1971.

## **The Shooting Begins**

It was from the rear of Howard's store that the Confederate column came streaming unannounced into Tracy City. As the first of the horsemen reached the front of the store, they surprised the sentinel and a fellow Connecticut soldier, David B. Powell. Shooting broke out immediately. The sentinel fired off his warning signal. A Confederate shot at the sentinel, but instead hit Powell, mortally wounding him. Then a general exchange of fire took place between Bledsoe's men and opposition in and around the store. Storekeeper Benham is reported to have fired out of the store window and wounded two Confederates.

At this point, assuming that a prime object of his attack was the contents of the store, Maj. Bledsoe made a tactical mistake. He turned his troop away from an immediate assault on the store, then little protected, and toward the depot about 250 yards away. This movement enabled the Union soldiers in the vicinity of the stockade, which was the majority of them, to make it to the safety of the structure.

At the time, however, it appeared as if a juicier plum had been plucked. When the shooting erupted, Capt. Upson with about ten of his men, said to have been without their arms, were at the depot. On hearing the report of guns, they set out immediately for the stockade, but were cut off by the Confederates before they could reach it. Shooting started, during which Capt. Upson was hit twice; and the outnumbered and encircled Yankees surrendered.

In the meantime, Lt. Jepson, the Union second in command, had formed the remainder of the occupying force in the stockade. Maj. Bledsoe and his men, with their prisoners under guard, now turned their attention back to the store and the stockade. They seem to have dismounted and formed a line of battle along the sheltered high ground at the front of the stockade. From their positions Bledsoe's men were able to fire into the fort and were safe from return fire. According to Wooster's report, "Lt. Jepson deemed it inexpedient to advance any portion of his force from the stockade, as by so doing he would be exposed to a cross-fire...and endanger the capture of is whole force."

### **Bledsoe's Surrender Terms**

With the Union commander in custody and his force holed up this way, Scott Bledsoe dispatched a flag of truce and sent a resident of Tracy City into the fort with surrender terms to Lt. Jepson:

'SIR: Captain Upson, with 10 of your men, are now in my possession. If the remainder of your command will surrender at once, without further bloodshed, the entire command shall be at once paroled and permitted to retain their personal effects.'

Maj. Bledsoe signed this order on the authority of Gen. John A. Wharton, to whose cavalry brigade he had been assigned since Murfreesboro.

Jepson declined this proposition. It is the only one published in the Official Records; but Col. Wooster claims that three others were sent in during the afternoon by Maj. Bledsoe, the ones unpublished "having in view the possession of the store," which Wooster concluded was "the evident object of their raid."

At last Bledsoe decided to tarry no longer with fruitless surrender negotiations. We have seen him at work before destroying what he conceived to be of use to the enemy. So did he in Tracy City. He ordered his men to fire the depot, the engine-house, and the buildings covering the coal-chutes. These were burned to the ground.

Then, though it was but a little birdie, he reckoned that the one he had in his hand was worth the two of the store. So on that January day of what had been a cold, cold winter, he took from his captives their overcoats and their blankets. Next, as he and Hughs had done so often with other prisoners, he paroled them, which was to extract from them a pledge or oath under which they would be released with the understanding that they would not again bear arms until exchanged, that is, until a like number of captured Confederates were similarly returned.

Bledsoe's force did not leave Tracy City, however, until darkness fell, which that time of year would have been sometime after five o'clock. In the meantime, the Confederates remained in position, covering the stockade. When finally they did retired, they had been in town for something more than four hours.

The horsemen traveled northward along the road to Altamont for about seven miles. Then they stopped for the night near the house of David Nunley, probably in the vicinity of the present Freemont locale. While they slept, a relief force of one hundred men arrived by train in Tracy City but no attempt was made to pursue Bledsoe and his men.

### **The Summing Up**

The Confederate force of Maj. Scott Bledsoe, which had been detached from the command of Col. John M. Hughs during the severely cold weather of January, 1864 spent all day Wednesday, Jan. 20, in Grundy County after having arrived in the county late the previous day following a horseback ride of about fifty miles from White County. Bledsoe's men did not leave the county until early Thursday morning after having spent a second night there. In all, therefore, the troop of about one hundred men spent late Tuesday, all day Wednesday, and early Thursday in the county.

While here, Scott Bledsoe staged an operation in keeping with the aims which he and John Hughs had been pursuing behind Union lines for more than four months. First, they were after Southern Unionists—"Union Tories," they called them. Bledsoe learned that Stephen Tipton of Altamont was the leader of such men in Grundy County, and his men put Tipton and one of his recruits to death.

Second, they were after the supplies on hand at isolated Union outposts. Of these, due to a failure of his tactics, Bledsoe was able to come off with precious little; but he did succeed in rendering Tracy City temporarily useless as a source of coal, which perhaps had some value to the occupying Union forces in the south.

Third, they were after prisoners, which could be exchanged for Confederates languishing in Federal hands. The number taken was not so great as at places like Glasgow and Monticello, but Bledsoe bagged a few and paroled them.

Finally, the attack, like its predecessors, served to catch another Union commander off his guard and show him how precarious was his hold, as yet, on the more remote outposts in Kentucky and Tennessee.

Thus while the foray into Grundy County, including "The Skirmish at Tracy City," was not the greatest success of Hughs-Bledsoe mission, it certainly was no failure.

### **Hughs Surprised Near Beersheba**

After Maj. Scott Bledsoe and his cavalry left Grundy County on the morning of Tuesday, Jan. 21, and headed back northward toward White County, there is no record of more offensive forays against the enemy until Bledsoe rejoined the command of Col. John M. Hughs on Feb. 14. By this date the worst of the harsh winter was over; and Hughs was ready again—to paraphrase his own earlier words—to furnish the Yankees and Union Tories with some more fighting.

The very day after Hughs and Bledsoe reunited, they attacked "A party of bushwhackers and Tories, numbering some less than a hundred...." These men were under the command of the notorious Capt. David (Tinker Dave) Beaty and Capt. Rufus Dowd. In this engagement the Confederates killed 17, captured two, and, Hughs said, "effectually dispersed the whole gang."

A week later there was another engagement, one which was reported in the Official Records both by Hughs and his Union counterpart, Col. William B. Stokes, commander of the Fifth Tennessee Cavalry. Their accounts of the so-called "Skirmish on Calfkiller Creek," which was fought near Sparta, essentially agree.

Stokes, who had established his headquarters at Sparta, sent two of his companies under the command of Capt. James T. Exum to scout on Calfkiller Creek. As these men, numbering about 110, returned to Sparta, they were attacked by about 55 or 60 of Hughs' command. (Stokes' survivors later claimed the attacking force numbered 300.) Never was Col. Hughs any more proud of his men than in this engagement. "Men never fought," he said, "with more desperation or gallantry." Outnumbered almost two to one, they nevertheless succeeded in surrounding and overwhelming the Tennessee Unionists, who lost 46 killed, 16 wounded, and four captured. Stokes reported that only six of his officers and 51 men made it through the hills back into town. Hughs' loss was just two wounded.

It is interesting, by the way, that Col. Stokes felt impelled in his report to pay high tribute to the Confederate John M. Hughs, who had beaten his men so badly. Stokes called Hughs "a brave, vigilant, and energetic officer." He also noted the discipline of Hughs' men, saying, "There is little or no robbing being done by the guerrillas, their attention being directed toward my men." Stokes also had learned to respect the weapons of Hughs' command. They are "well armed," he said, "having secured the best of arms when on their raids into Kentucky."

### **Commanders of the Upper Cumberlands**

This also is as good a place as any to mention other Confederate officers besides Hughs and Bledsoe whom Stokes believed to be operating in the Upper Cumberland area. In his report of the Calfkiller Creek disaster, the Union commander also cited Hamilton, Ferguson and Carter. Carter was Capt. Joe Carter, somewhat a mystery figure about whom little is known. Hamilton was Lt. Col. Oliver P. Hamilton of Jackson County. His body of cavalry had been mustered into the Confederate service for the local defense of border counties along the Tennessee-Kentucky line. Little more than a week after the Calfkiller skirmish, on March 4, he was captured at Celina, charged by Federal officials with being a guerilla, and killed (probably murdered) while being transferred to Lexington, Ky., for trial.

Ferguson was the well known Capt. Champ Ferguson, a man who bore the Yankees a deep hatred for how they had treated members of his family in their native Clinton County, Ky. For safety he moved to White county and organized a company of cavalry, which from time to time may have operated in conjunction with Hamilton's horsemen. Ferguson was accused by the Yankees of just about every atrocity in the book, but these allegations seem mostly to have come about as a result of treating Ferguson as an outlaw instead of the duly commissioned Confederate officer which he and his superiors claimed him to be. Thus whenever his men killed a Yankee in battle, Ferguson was charged with a murder. He was captured after the war and tried at Nashville by Federal officials as a murderer. Despite the



testimony in his defense at the trial by Confederate Maj. Gen. Joseph (Fightin' Joe) Wheeler, Ferguson was convicted and then executed by the Yankees.

Thus in being linked to Hamilton, Ferguson, and Carter, Hughs and Bledsoe were in danger themselves of being treated as guerillas who were not entitled to the usages of war. In fact, when their men were captured, they often were not treated as prisoners of war, but summarily executed.

### **Raids to the South**

Just four days after the fight on Calfkiller Creek, Hughs' command was about 45 miles to the southeast at Washington, a town seven miles from Dayton. The Confederates captured the place and 65 prisoners, in the fighting killing three and wounding seven.

The next day, on Feb. 27, Hughs' cavalry rode across Walden's Ridge into Sequatchie Valley. There they broke up an organization of state guards which Andrew Johnson, Military Governor of Tennessee, had ordered formed, and took another 73 prisoners.

Hughs then returned to White County and there, on March 10, again became engaged with a body of Col. Stokes' men. This time the fighting ended in a standoff.

Following this skirmish, Hughs once more turned southward, but now to the southwest; undoubtedly passing through Grundy County. His probable route was through Collins River Valley, up the mountain at Beersheba Springs, down the mountain through Burroughs Cove, and thence through Pelham Valley into Coffee County. His destination was the track of the Nashville and Chattanooga Railroad someplace between Tullahoma and Estill Springs.

During the afternoon of March 16, Hughs' men tore up a segment of track in this vicinity; and when the supply train came along, it derailed. The reports of Col. Hughs and of the two Union officers who told of this incident do not agree in all particulars. It would seem, however, that at least three cars of the train were burned, a number (60, Hughs said) of Yankee soldiers captured, and several "Yankee negroes" aboard the train killed and wounded.

### **Surprised Below Beersheba Mountain**

Upon being attacked by a relief party, Hughs' command retraced its steps, heading back to Hillsboro, thence to Pelham, and back over Cumberland Mountain. The

Confederates camped at the foot of Beersheba Mountain, as Bledsoe perhaps had done two months before on his way to attack Tracy City.

Here, "for the first and only time" during his long campaign behind the lines, Hughs' luck ran out on him. As it developed, when Hughs left White County on the way to his attack on the railroad, this time Col. Stokes sent a party of his men in pursuit. They came upon Hughs' men in their camp there below Beersheba at breakfast time on March 18. In the melee that followed, the Confederates lost at least two men killed and probably some horses, saddles, clothing and the like.

The worst of the loss from Col. Hughs' standpoint was a haversack which contained valuable papers, including his record of expenses for the support of his command while it was behind the lines. The loss caused him no end of trouble. Almost a year later, on Jan. 19, 1865, Scott Bledsoe was writing a letter in support of Hughs' claim for reimbursement, in which he alluded to the lost haversack.

### **The Expedition Ends**

The surprise of his command near Beersheba Springs probably was the decisive event in persuading John Hughs that it was time for him to make his way, if possible, back to the main body of the Confederate Army. Middle Tennessee was becoming overrun with Federal troops, who at last were beginning to hem him up.

Accordingly, on April 2, Hughs started out with 95 officers and men by way of Morristown. Twenty miles from that place, however, he found that the Army had left the area.

He therefore turned back, presumably to his home vicinity, and there rested his weary horses before making another attempt to get out. This time his men concluded to make their way in smaller parties of 25 to 30 men. They set out on April 18, and Scott Bledsoe was with John Hughs when they were reunited two days later with the Army at Dalton, Ga.

Hughs had been gone almost exactly eight months; Bledsoe, about 6 ½ months. During his absence, Hughs had campaigned over an area of almost ten thousand square miles. His command, while suffering only about a dozen men killed and as many wounded, had killed more than 120 of the enemy, wounded at least 60, and captured 700 prisoners. Moreover, it had captured and destroyed Union supplies valued somewhere between a quarter and a half-million dollars. Five Union outposts had been surprised and captured outright. The sum is quite an achievement for an officer sent out merely to round up stragglers and enforce conscription.

## Final View of Hughs and Bledsoe

After reporting to Gen. Joseph E. Johnston, Col. John Hughs was ordered to rejoin his regiment, the 25<sup>th</sup> Tennessee Infantry, by then serving in Lee's Army of Northern Virginia at Chaffin's farm. Similarly, Bledsoe resumed his position as major in Baxter Smith's cavalry.

The man who led the raid on Tracy City fought on with his fellow Tennessee cavalymen for another year. He fought through Georgia from Dalton to Savannah, retired with the Army through South Carolina, and was present when the surrender was made in North Carolina on April 26, 1865. Fittingly, one of his regiment's most valiant rushes at the enemy had been made in Bentonville, N. C., only a few days before the surrender.

And what of John Hughs? With a regiment steadily diminishing in numbers, he too, fought on. The historian of the 25<sup>th</sup> gives us a final view of him in action. It comes as, with his men, he is trying to hold Fort Harrison, opposing Federals coming in swarms over the works. At that moment "Col. Hughs alone turned and charged upon them, emptying in their faces every barrel of his pistols, his horse falling under him full of lead." Still, he managed an escape.

On March 1, 1865, Col. Hughs tendered his resignation as a military officer of the Confederacy. The reason was a simple one. "My regiment," he wrote, "has been reduced to less than twenty muskets and has been consolidated with other regiments...."

Thus did the long road which began early in August 1861, at Camp Myers come to an end for two gallant leaders of Confederate arms, whose stories are integral to an account of the most famous Civil War actions which occurred in Grundy County, Tennessee.

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The sources of this five-part series on the background of the Civil War skirmish at Tracy City and the action itself are: the personal military records of Col. John M. Hughs and Maj. Willis Scott Bledsoe, the Official Records of the Union and Confederate Armies, Tennesseans in the Civil War (Part I), the Confederate Military Annals of Tennessee, and other standard works on the Civil war, including *The Civil War Day by Day*, and *The Civil War Dictionary*.

